

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION



A COURAGEOUS VICTIM Taking a Stand against MS-13



Our MS-13 Task Force was able to resolve the case quickly because the victim came forward with security surveillance tapes of the robbery.

After MS-13 gang members robbed a Houston beauty salon at gunpoint last January and sexually assaulted a salon employee, one of the gang members went a step further: he took the owner's picture so he knew exactly who she was. If she thought about going to the police, he said, she would be sorry. The owner was also told that from now on, she would be expected to pay \$100 a week to the gang for protection.

What happened to this woman—robbery and extortion at the hands of MS-13—is not unusual, explained the agent in charge of our Houston Gang and Violent Crime Squad. But her response—to stand up to the gang—was very unusual.

Though she feared for her life, the salon owner called the local police instead of paying the extortion money, and was put in touch with our MS-13 task force. She had made a smart—and brave—decision.



An MS-13 member arrested in the Houston salon robbery and extortion plot displays the gang affiliation tattooed on his back.

MS-13, whose formal name is Mara Salvatrucha, is one of the largest Hispanic street gangs in the United States. According to the 2009 National Gang Threat Assessment, there could be as many as 50,000 MS-13 members worldwide, with 10,000 members in the United States. The gang is known for its highly violent ways, and members are involved in all kinds of illegal activities, including drugs, robbery, extortion, weapons trafficking, and murder.

Larger gangs exist in Houston, our agent there said, but MS-13 is of particular concern because members are often heavily armed and well trained in the use of weapons and assault tactics.

Victims are usually so scared of MS-13 that they would rather pay extortion money than risk retribution. In Latin America, where MS-13 originated, such extortion schemes are common.

That is why the Houston salon owner's story is so remarkable. Despite her fear, she was also angry that the same crimes she saw in her native El Salvador were

happening in the United States. So she came to us with security surveillance tapes in hand that showed the robbery and the faces of several gang members who had participated.

In a recently televised segment on MS-13 produced by the Spanish-language network Univision, the salon owner recounted her ordeal. "They threatened to kill me,+she said of the gang members. %And I am very afraid for my life and my family.+But she came forward, she said, because %like to work and fight for what I want."

About a week after the robbery, with the owner refusing to pay protection money, two gang members drove by the salon and sprayed 17 bullets into the front door, shattering the windows of cars parked along the street in the process.

But thanks to the surveillance tape of the robbery and the salon owner's cooperation, it didn't take long to round up the gang members. In all, seven people were arrested, and six handguns and one shotgun were seized. The gang members face state charges of aggravated robbery· which can carry long prison sentences in Texas· and the possibilities of federal charges as well.

%This case is proof that victims of crime should not suffer in silence,+our agent said. The salon owner, currently under the protection of the FBI, %was courageous to stand up to gang members, and as a result those gang members are now in jail.+

And because of this case, other MS-13 extortion victims in Houston have come forward, our agent said. %If victims contact us, we can help.+



"They threatened to kill me,+the salon owner, shown here in a television interview, said of the gang members. She called police instead of paying extortion money.